THE LAUGHTER OF THE ANGELS
October 22, 2006

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 104:1–9
Mark 10:35–45
Job 38:1–7; 42:1–6

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind."
Job 38:1 (NRSV)

The more I reflect on the amazing conclusions of astrophysics and,
like human beings from time immemorial, look up into the clear night sky,
am I not to wonder what it all means, where it all comes from?
To answer, "Out of nothing," is no explanation.
Reason cannot be satisfied with that. The only serious alternative . . .
is that the whole stems from that first creative cause of causes,
which we call God and indeed the Creator God.
Even if I cannot prove God I can affirm God. . . .
God for me here and now, God at the beginning, God from all eternity.

Hans Küng
Does God Exist?

One of the delightful things about grandchildren, and there are many delightful things, is that they are an almost endless source of sermon illustrations. A prominent theologian once said that children are good theologians: they think ontologically—about the very essence of things—and raise the most profound questions. "Who made God?" I recall, is a perennial favorite. Four-year-old Eleanor was a good theologian when she decided to talk to her daddy about death and what happens to people when they die. Her father responded that we go to heaven to be with God. He went on to say that he would already be there when she arrived and he'd be so happy to see her. "No, no, Daddy," Eleanor said. "I don't want to see you when I get to heaven. I want to see Jesus and God!"

Eleanor was exactly right. God is the subject, the reason we are here, the reason we got out of bed, put on Sunday clothes, contended with the marathon, and did something countercultural, something we didn't have to do: came to church. "What shall I preach about?" the young seminary graduate asked his professor as he faced the daunting task of preaching his first sermon. "Preach about God" the professor responded, "and preach about twenty minutes." That's my plan this morning.

It is the basic human question: God or no God. Is there a “More,” William James asked, something “more” than this world, this life, or is this all there is? Whether we realize it or not, we build our worldview on the answer to that question. We practice our religion and we structure our lives on it. It is, Marcus Borg says, the central question in modern Western culture. Do we live in the presence of an eternal God, or is secular humanism the only rational option? Is there a “More,” or is this physical world that we touch, see, feel, all there is?

Most of us were brought up with the idea of God “up there,” in heaven, sitting on a mighty throne. Sometimes the picture was clear: a kindly, grandfatherly old man with a long white beard, or perhaps an angry judge. God “up there.” It’s an old idea based on ancient cosmology. In the space age, we had to rethink the whole notion: “up” wasn’t really up anymore, so we started to think about God “out there,” at some place in the universe. God created everything, returned to his throne to observe human history, occasionally intervening to change the course of events: to rescue, to punish, reward, or help people with matters grand and trivial; to heal, to save, to help win the war or with the sale of the house or the acquisition of a parking place. My friend Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Seminary, keeps an icon on her dashboard—“The Parking Place God” she calls it. She lives in New York City where you need all the help you can get.

Marcus Borg, who teaches religion at Oregon State University, says that sooner or later that concept of God, which he calls “supernatural theism,” stops working for us and many simply drop the subject, stop believing altogether. Every school term one of his students says after class, “This is all very interesting but I have a problem every time you use the word ‘God,’ because, you see”—here there is usually a pause and a deep breath—“I really don’t believe in God.” Borg states, “I always respond in the same way: ‘Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.’ Invariably it is the God of supernatural theism. I then tell them that I don’t believe in that God either. They are surprised. They don’t know that there is an alternative to supernatural theism” (*The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, p. 68).

For most people, what first challenges this older idea of God on a throne, up in heaven, occasionally intervening, is the reality of suffering and tragedy. We bump along with our cozy grandfatherly God on his throne, and then someone we love gets terribly, painfully sick, or three wonderful teenagers perish in an automobile wreck, or a man walks into an elementary school and kills five little girls, and we ask “Why?” It is an inevitable and profound question that we all ask. If God is sitting up there on a throne watching and can intervene, then why in the world doesn’t God do it, intervene, stop the Holocaust, the wars, the senseless tragedy, the 9/11s? Why doesn’t God

simply abolish cancer and birth defects? You can get out of the dilemma by concluding that God either causes the tragedies or at least allows them for reasons that are God's alone. But there is something basically wrong with that. It doesn't work—God causing human suffering. allowing the suffering. So maybe what is wrong is the God concept. Maybe we need to start all over again.

A good place to start is with an ancient story—the story of Job, who, in fact, asked the very same questions we are still asking about God.

Job was a good man, lived a good life, enjoyed success as a businessman, husband, and father. In the story, Job doesn't know that there is a conversation going on in heaven between God and Satan. The topic is faith, the fascinating human tendency to believe in God. "Look at Job," God says, "a good and faithful man." "Take away all he has," Satan responds, "and you'll see how little he actually believes."

The book of Job is one of the great accomplishments in the history of literature. Job's life falls apart. He loses it all: cattle, children, his own dignity and reputation and even the support of his wife, who tells him to curse God and die.

Friends tell him his suffering is a result of his own sin. Job knows better. He has done nothing to deserve this. And so Job does the unexpected: even in his suffering, he holds more tightly to God, petitions God to speak to him, to explain, to help him understand why all this has happened.

Finally God answers, out of the whirlwind. And what God says, beautifully and poetically, is that "I am God and you are not." "Where were you when I shut in the sea and made the clouds and commanded the morning?" God asks. On and on it goes, and it leaves Job speechless. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me." And then one of the most provocative statements of all: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you."

What did Job see? Apparently, a God far larger, more vast, than anything he had imagined. A God indescribable, who will not submit to human interrogation. A God, in the words of the opening hymn this morning, "immortal, invisible, in light inaccessible,hid from our eyes." But a God who is real and present with Job, a God with whom Job can converse, a God who comes close enough to be with Job in all he experiences.

And so the answer is not that God causes or allows suffering but that suffering happens in the freedom of the life God has given. And God shares it, understands it, enters into it with us, weeps with us when we weep, holds us when we fall, and keeps us finally and ultimately safe and secure.

What kind of God you believe in makes all the difference in the world. Just as there is a choice between believing or not believing in God, so we choose what kind of God to believe in: a remote, impersonal God who orchestrates everything that happens, a kind of heavenly puppeteer, busily pulling the strings, or a personal God who is present in life with us, a God, in St. Paul's terms, "in whom we live and move and have our being."

There are no words big enough, but Marcus Borg tries: "God is the name we use for the nonmaterial, stupendous, wondrous 'More' that includes the universe even as God transcends the universe. This is God as the 'encompassing Spirit'" (*The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith,* p. 65).

Furthermore, what you believe God is like shapes your faith, your practice of religion, and the way you live your life. Is God primarily concerned with personal virtue, a lawgiver and judge with a long list of requirements, who will determine whether we are rewarded or punished? Or is God compassionate and just, concerned to transform individuals into compassionate human beings who live in gratitude and trust and who strive to transform the world into God's just and peaceful kingdom?

Based on what you believe God is like, there are two very different Christian messages, Borg argues. On the one hand, it's bad news of a coming last judgment for which you'd better be ready, a religion of threat, anxiety, and self-preservation, or, on the other hand, a very different kind of news: good news of an invitation to trust God with your eternal destiny and to live life now in gratitude, love, and compassion.

There is a little of that in James's and John's request to Jesus to allow them seats of honor in the kingdom. They're trying to use religion for their own advantage, their own self-aggrandizement now and in the hereafter. They are thinking like contemporary televangelists, the gospel of prosperity and success. And they are thinking far too small. Jesus tells them to forget about it; to become servants, to trust him with the outcome of their lives now and always.

One way of being Christian is based on God saving some from an eternal hell. Another way, a more biblical way, is the transformation of ourselves into the people God wants us to be in the here and now: generous, compassionate, just, loving, serving, trusting God—with our lives, our futures, and our deaths.

Now the trouble with a sermon on God is that when we talk about God, we are, all of us, inclined to try to say too much. Part of what God says to Job is "be quiet, shut up for awhile, stop talking, and listen." The people who think

most deeply and write most persuasively on the subject know that when it comes to God, our language is simply inadequate. The philosopher Descartes said, “A finite mind cannot grasp God, who is infinite. But that does not prevent him from having a perception of God . . . just as we can touch a mountain without being able to put one’s arms around it” (William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, p. 84).

Belden Lane, professor of theological studies and American studies at Saint Louis University, states that “we must speak [about God] but yet we cannot speak without stammering.” And best of all, the great Karl Barth, who wrote more about God than almost anybody in history—thirteen volumes of dogmatic theology, 9,185 pages—near the end of his life said, “The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about God in a book of Dogmatics. They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each is thicker than the previous one. As they laugh, the say to one another: ‘Look! Here he comes now with his little pushcart full of volumes of the Dogmatics! . . . Truly, the angels laugh.”

It is the most profound question of all—God. All religion begins with the belief that there is a “More.” Each religion, given the limits of language, names it: Yahweh, God, Allah, Brahman, Tao.

What makes us Christian is a distinct belief that God is beyond our ability to understand or describe, a mystery, but also that God, as Job learned, comes intimately close—to share our life, to be with us in all our days, on the good days and not-so-good days, in experiences of joy and sadness, victory and defeat, birth and death. What makes us Christian is our belief that God came close in Jesus Christ, lived in him, showed us what human life looks like, what our lives could look like; in him experienced human life, even death, in him, and in him defeated the powers of death. Christians, with all people everywhere, ask the question of God, stammer, and finally stand in silence before the mystery. Christians ask about God and look at Jesus.

The existence of God cannot be proved. Why believe then? Marcus Borg suggests three answers:

1. The collective wisdom of the human race. We seem to be created to believe: someone said “we are created with a God-shaped space in our hearts.”

2. The provocative position of modern science, faced with the mystery of a universe expanding at the speed of light into nothingness, now saying, “What we don’t know is infinitely larger than what we know: that there is, at the heart of things, a mystery.”

3. Personal experience.

We're not sure we want to trust experience as an argument for God, we Westerners aren't. In fact, many of us have been schooled to distrust experience, emotion. And yet, we do experience and feel; we do have experiences in which we know at a level beyond knowing the truth. Pascal said, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." We do, I believe, as Job did one day, see God. So listen to your own experience: be open, at least, to the suggestion that God is close, that God comes to strengthen, heal, comfort, encourage. You don't have to tell; you don't have to testify. Sometimes I think it's better not even to try. But do listen: "Listen to your life" Frederick Buechner said. Pay attention, particularly when you have a lump in your throat and tears in your eyes.

Whenever I read the verse in Job about God speaking out of the whirlwind, I think automatically about a book by the late Langdon Gilkey, professor of theology at the University of Chicago, *Naming the Whirlwind.* It's a book of theology, and, for me, a very important one. I got it down off the shelf to see if I could find some help with this sermon. It's a big 483-page, old book. The price on the tattered paper cover is $2.75. I paged through it and found a passage marked years ago, and it brought back a vivid memory and experience of n the day I first read the passage. We were living in Scotland that summer. I had taken Gilkey's book with me and was working my way through it. The marked passage evoked a memory: a foggy day in the Western Highlands, a light drizzle. We had driven up into the hills, parked the car, and went for a walk. It was isolated, absolutely silent except for the bleating of the sheep and new lambs. We walked single file up the steep, rocky path, all seven of us, and I thought I had never been in a more beautiful place, with the people I loved most in all the world. Life was so good. God was so good. There is so much "More." Before turning around to walk down, my youngest, three at the time, holding my hand—we stopped and he and I built a cairn, a small rock tower the Scots built all over the Highlands to mark special spots. He liked building cairns, and so did I, so we built one.

When we arrived back at the small manse in Kinlochleven, I returned to reading Gikley, and this is what I read and marked that day. Gilkey is talking about the experience of ultimacy, God in secular experience. He writes,

> Common aspects of our experience: our deep joy in living, a sense of the pulsating vitality, and strength of life that every creature knows; the awe at the common wonder and beauty of life—perhaps in the creatures of nature or at the birth of a child; the precious sense of meaning and of hope when we find some purpose or activity that draws out our powers, and we know who we are in history and why we are here at this time and

> place; the wonder of community. . . . These common experiences are given to us and not created by us, but it is they that buoy us up, that make us glad we are alive, that fill us with deep joy.

And then, Gilkey added, “As gifts, they come to us from beyond ourselves, from the ultimate source of power and meaning.” That is to say, from God.

> Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind. . . .
>
> And Job answered: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.